

The Vocabularyclept Poem, No. 1

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Mr. Lindon has solved the VC poem presented in the previous issue—and he has done this under further handicaps, the cause of which was my carelessness in presenting the problem to him. How he finally arrived at a technically exact solution under these conditions is a story in itself. The following passages from his letter make fascinating reading.

You will be interested to hear how I set about it I am sure. First I cut the necessary 500 odd slips of cardboard and wrote the words on them, then put them in a shallow tray with lettered compartments. Then, having taken some days doing this, I scrapped the idea as hopeless! I should never have been able to find the words I wanted quickly enough, should never have known what was available. So I made out a second alphabetically ordered list, like your own (which I wanted to leave untouched for reference) and worked from this, blacking out any words I used as I used them. My starting idea was to pick out those words used twice (or more often) and separate them into two batches, one for the opening stanza, one for the final stanza, so as to get some sort of unity at the ends, so to speak. In the event, however, alterations distorted this idea out of all recognition. But I did get a goodish opening stanza and an equally good final one. And a second stanza and a penultimate one. And, in fact, others in-between, until only two remained to do. Then the screw began to turn! I found myself left with a quite hopeless jumble of words, 16 the's, 8 it's, all the me's, lots of shall's, will's, should's, and so on—useless for making anything at all. I suppose our styles of writing caused this, a difference of density, a degree of compression of material. So, miserably, I had to go through it all, removing good phrases like 'Night is an ocean of pitch' and replacing them with mere emptiness, heartbreaking! This gave me some material for my two remaining stanzas, but so far random material only. I shuffled some of it into something like sense (or nonsense) and then made a second raid on my already written parts to obtain such words as were necessary to finish off what was done in rough only. For this latter part I did use my pieces of cardboard, so the labour of making them was not entirely wasted; but it would have been quicker to make only a number of blanks and write such words on them as were needed at this late stage.

Finally I got all the words shuffled in somehow, with tolerable results; but oh how wretched were all my excellent earlier stanzas by this time! I spent about a week trying to improve the whole poem, but this certainly takes time since one word cannot usually be put in instead of another simply using a straight switch-over; if word A would improve the effect at B, word B won't usually go in at A, but might possibly (if . . .) go in at C, and so on. One could spend weeks at this without much change.

Well, I send you the result. It does make some sort of sense and, like genuine poetry, does seem to have elusive undercurrents of meaning. I wonder what you will think of it. (I, HWB, am amazed at it! Ed.)

WINTER RETROSPECT VC Poem, solution, J. A. Lindon
(Ed. Note: Mr. Lindon worked without
knowledge of this title.)

I.

Night sends me this whirl of snow.
Under the low trees the watery glow
Of your lamp looking through the dusk—my
Thoughts are still that it must die.
Upon these walls the snow is driving,
Grow with the wind's lonely music, my soul, riving
Bland aspirations split with the blast up in the eaves,
And I shall remember only that the mind, though failing, weaves
Tinsel in darkness, memory a kaleidoscope, floss
That soundless flies, musk rose, and all that nearly was.

II.

You and I were always alone, excelled only in resolute seeings
Of fate found in the crystal gloaming and led on silence, mystic beings;
You and I through rain would watch forever-receding infinity,
You and I would see in the snow things that must never be.

III.

Head sinks from hand to elbow. Lying on my quilt
Listening—is it the couch, is it the lilt
of music?—I battle with the universe, long
For a few men less heartless, human wrong
And all the ache of the human mind and the soul forgiven.
Here now are the gods; nowhere but here is heaven.

IV.

If only all were venal! Ah, we are versed
In thy theme as worlds plunge downward with the first
Imaginary thud of the lost ideal, something we
Have not done, though the world did, so watery
And vain the slow knot of the veins,
Short of determination, all alone, and partly
That it perhaps cannot reach with lesser pains.

V.

Being the least of things, you should
 Hurry through the lighted world as through a charred wood.
 Eat bread before the lamp goes out,
 While you can finish it.
 What long ago exists? Then take you hold
 Of this late coat of pain before, with months, old
 Winter falls away; sooner than stand the strain, be filled
 With fire and build.

VI.

Yes, we were so nearly it,
 Were perhaps not meant to doubt.
 Can I love your failing me, and the tragedy?
 Was the white all
 Yellow when, the candle lighted, you came to see
 But candle?

VII.

May your will be the if and should, go
 Swirling me there alone when the snows shall blow
 Away through an ocean of pitch. Shall the snow
 Be then your will, the only will come out
 Of all the future said of it?

VIII.

An eternity is burnt on the stove that takes
 Coal-oil. For me, crude in the oven bakes
 A loaf. And clean bark in the grates. I felt
 It slightly comforted me. Snow gone, and the icicles melt.
 One time all the chimney blazed, yet
 Fate is magnanimous: not a death or a hardship except
 Moving out into the mud and wet.

IX.

They sit me in the dusk by the window-pane
 To feel that all my days are in vain
 Without you of all women to own
 And love me. Such hunger, all alone.

WINTER RETROSPECT VC Poem, original, Howard W. Bergerson

Blow, blast. Whirl through the dusk, snow,
 Downward swirling, then into the trees go.
 Short is the gloaming, long thy soundless driving.
 Coat the tinsel icicles under my eaves.
 Hurry your failing glow to my window-pane.
 Build up the slow ache in me that rain
 Cannot. Only the snow the soul of winter is riving.
 Only the snow the soul of me. Only the snow weaves
 That watery crystal floss filled with dusk
 And sends through the walls that bland and watery musk.

The fire is nearly out. The wood is low—and wet,
 With bark and veins of white pitch—split in the snow and mud.
 The coal-oil sinks. The lamp is not out yet.
 In the stove a charred knot falls through the grates with a thud.

I must clean the lamp chimney. In the oven bakes
 A loaf of crude bread, burnt perhaps, but takes
 That lesser hunger with it when it goes.
 It must be nearly done, it slightly rose,
 Ah yes, it did—I shall sit and eat it all alone.
 Were you here with me it should be sooner gone.

Were you here with me, you would finish first
 And watch me, lying on the couch, your yellow head
 Upon your hand, your elbow on the quilt.
 Few are the things I remember that you said.
 Perhaps you were comforted to see me fed,
 Though being only in the silence versed
 Or listening to the lost wind's lonely lilt.

I was alone before I found you,
 Alone in all this world of hardship and of pain,
 Of heartless men and venal women vain.
 I was alone and meant
 To battle all and one with resolute determination.
 And then from out the darkness a lighted candle came
 And a strain of music. You were the lighted candle,
 Love the magnanimous theme.

But the you of long ago
 Now exists nowhere in the universe
 Except in the vain world of my own mind
 As a forever-receding imaginary,
 Always before me moving, blazed on the mystic night,
 Looking away.

If these are not the pains that human beings
 Can stand, can hold the least, would die without,
 In my mind there is something less than doubt.
 All thoughts of death, all music, and all seeings,
 In the memory of love, are tragedy.

The time may never come, and if so, late,
 When we shall have excelled an old ideal.
 The days will grow to months, the snows will melt,
 And such as I will still feel what we felt.
 So flies the kaleidoscope of human fate
 Through all the future, while all the worlds that be
 Plunge away through an ocean of infinity.

For this the gods of fate should be forgiven,
That they are partly wrong, not all things see,
And by failing aspirations reach we heaven
Though it shall take for all eternity.

* * *

POOR AMELIA

We always thought of AMELIA as a nice, pleasant sort of girl. Influencing our judgment was the fact that AMELIA is a name of Teutonic origin meaning "industrious," as well as the fact that, in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, AMELIA is a loving, trusting girl who lives an unpretentious and happy life.

Alas, it isn't so. The true facts have now been uncovered, and we feel obliged to pass them along to you. That branch of medicine devoted to the study of monstrosities uses the word AMELIA to designate absence of the limbs, and the kindred term AMELUS to describe a monstrosity without limbs. Poor AMELIA!

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REAL NUMBER MAGIC

From our verbal point of view, there is nothing particularly remarkable about mathematical magic squares. After all, there are millions of them.

Yet, once in a while there comes along a meritorious magic square which owes its distinctiveness not to the mathematician but to the word expert, the calligraphist. Such a square is the one shown at the left, below:

11	77	62	29
69	22	17	71
27	61	79	12
72	19	21	67

29	17	61	72
71	62	19	27
12	21	77	69
67	79	22	11

Each line, column, and diagonal in this square adds up to 179. Now, turn the square upside down, with the result shown at the right, above. You still have a readable magic square, with the same constant of 179!